

The Left Atrium

Warfare, photojournalism and witnessing

Regarding the pain of others

Susan Sontag

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The dominant understanding of human nature in current theories of moral reasoning is notably idealistic. Contemporary discourse on ethics tends not to grapple with the lunar landscape of the Somme battlefield, the death camps at Dachau and Auschwitz, the mass killing spree in Rwanda. Reasonable moral agents, we are informed, would not commit such acts. True enough, but human history is scarcely characterized by gentle reason unfolding through time. Our late 20th- and early 21st-century theories of morality do a notably poor job of recognizing the extent to which particular experiences of human misery and agony are products of deliberate, calculated actions by other humans. And they are quite incapable of explaining the satisfied grins on the faces of *Einsatzgruppen* squad members photographed as they execute unarmed Jews or Russians, or the pleased looks of happy, church-going families gazing out of photos of charred, naked, lynched black Americans.

If philosophers and theologians have often ignored the extent to which human misery results from the deliberate, carefully planned choices and actions of other human beings, photojournalists have offered much grimmer testimonies of the human condition. Witnesses to the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, and conflicts in Korea, Biafra, Vietnam, Rwanda and Bosnia — photographers of war, famine and genocide — provide a sordid visual chronology of the violence of the modern age. Photojournalists, much like members of Médecins Sans Frontières and the International Committee of the Red Cross, have played an important international role in bearing witness to human suffering and

insisting that members of relatively privileged societies recognize and confront what is happening in settings of violence and planned mayhem. Susan Sontag's latest work, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, is a thoughtful meditation on the limitations and capacities of photojournalism in helping humans comprehend the causes and consequences of war, famine and other forms of destruction.

Sontag explores how photography connects humans to events unfolding in far-flung places. It was through the visual medium of photography, Sontag argues, that distant noncombatants were first exposed to the consequences of war. Photographs offered depictions of ruin, death, destruction, loss, terror and suffering that could never be conveyed by text, dioramas or etchings. Photographs, Sontag suggests, brought together both objectivity (a snapshot or "trace" of events) and subjectivity (the individual agency of the particular photographer framing the "shot"). By the time of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, photojournalism had become a special form of witnessing. New photo magazines such as *Vu* in France, *Life* in the United States and *Picture Post* in the United Kingdom were established in the 1930s. In 1947, Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson and other leading photographers established the Magnum Photo Agency in Paris.

The moral dimension of photojournalism is readily recognizable in photographs of the liberation of the death camps in Poland and Germany, the shelling and sniper warfare in Bosnia and the machete victims in Rwanda. In different times and places, such photographs have served different purposes: to bear witness to human suffering; to provide an evidentiary record of crimes against hu-

manity; to urge intervention on the side of particular victims; to generate public support for the negotiated cessation of hostilities. Though moralistic, photojournalism is also multivalent. Photographs, though they have been characterized as "a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye," as Virginia Woolf called them, can be accorded different meanings and put to different uses.

While Sontag explores the divergent uses to which documentary photographs can be put, she pays particular attention to the antinationalist, antiwar theme running through the history of the photography of war. It is a mistake to think that this theme emerges only with the opposition to the war in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. Rather, Sontag describes a remarkable album of photographs from the First World War. Published in 1924 by Ernst Friedrich, a conscientious objector during the "Great War," *Krieg dem Kriege!* (*War Against War!*) drew upon German military and medical archives to provide a horrific view of the consequences of the industrialized warfare of 1914–1918. Denounced by the German government, Friedrich's book prompted police raids on bookstores and several lawsuits intended to prevent public display of photographs from his book.

The fear that photographs of destroyed villages, mutilated bodies and devastated landscapes would repulse viewers and generate public opposition to warfare has always been a prime concern of governments and military organizations seeking to censor images from the battlefield. Sontag describes the efforts of military officials to control access of journalists and photographers to the battlefield and limit coverage of death and destruction. She describes both the official and tacit norms at work in limiting graphic coverage of particularly brutal deaths to outsiders, enemies and distant foreigners.

Finally, Sontag considers whether the frenzy of contemporary news media

induces a kind of compassion fatigue in which photographs of warfare, famine, genocide and other forms of suffering cease to have any effect on viewers. Departing from her previous claims in *On Photography* (1977), she argues that some photographs maintain their iconic power through repeated viewing, and that it is not “overexposure” that is the source of indifference. Rather, Sontag suggests, we become indifferent toward photographs and the events they record when we conclude that these images have little to do with us and there is nothing we can do.

Regarding the Pain of Others provides a powerful meditation on the crucial role of photography in generating bonds between individuals in relative safety and comfort and humans confronting starva-

tion, mass executions or forced expulsion. These bonds are never guaranteed by the images alone. Photographs require interpretation, and different viewers put particular photographs to distinct uses. Nonetheless, without the work of photojournalists, without the labours of individuals willing to enter danger zones to witness and record what is occurring, the ties between the relatively safe and the profoundly vulnerable would be even more tenuous and fragile than they already are. The human rights activist, the physician leaving the safety of the local community hospital for the field clinics of Médecins Sans Frontières, the international relief worker, the soldier assigned to help broker peace between opposing factions, the photojournalist working in Bosnia or Afghanistan help

link those of us in settings of relative safety and comfort to regions of unrelenting poverty, hunger and violence. They remind us of the many episodes of human suffering that are not “accidents” or “acts of nature” but products of deliberate human action. They challenge us to do something, to think, and to stop pretending that the tribulations of others are wholly removed from our own lives.

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Lifeworks

Waking nights

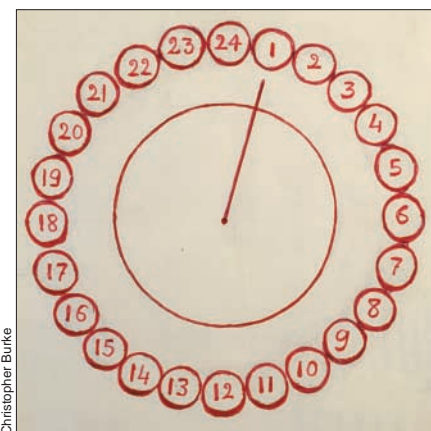
There is a longing for resolution in insomnia. A desire to find the key that will unlock the door to sleep; to end the staring, the turning, the pacing; to slow the recurring thoughts that spin with building momentum. This quest for relief is evident in *The Insomnia Drawings* of Louise Bourgeois.

Bourgeois considers her 220 *Insomnia Drawings* to be a single work. They were made in the nighttime hours during a particularly severe bout of insomnia that lasted from November 1994 to June 1995. Like much of her work, these drawings are conjured from childhood memories, which resurface here in the form of abstract images infused with an underlying sense of anxiety. Produced during a time of undesired consciousness, they represent a way to resolve and conquer sleeplessness.

Born in Paris in 1911, Bourgeois emigrated to the United States in the 1930s. She is best known as a sculptor, but her works have never been limited by one particular medium, as they incorporate anything from wood to glass, string to rubber. Rendered in ink, gouache, pencil

and crayon, *The Insomnia Drawings* are similarly diverse. But it is the invocations of the past that join this work with her others. Memories find their way into these drawings through recurrent motifs of water, music and plant life. The images that appear from the abstracted designs seem to move, like the objects they suggest, in flowing, undulating and waving patterns. Many of the lines in the drawings form spirals that appear to drift away from or toward the viewer. The effect is like staring at a hypnotist's wheel, a device to lure subjects into a trance or to invoke long-forgotten memories. There are circular forms that interconnect, overlapping in patterns that flash like the spots of light one sees with closed eyes after staring into the light — or like unwanted, lingering memories. There are lines that seem to hang from the top of the page and blow in the breeze, like swinging laundry, or like the gentle rocking that sends a baby into sleep. There are lines that close on one another to form the deep hallways we run through in nightmares; and there are lines that spiral downward into bottom-

less pits, creating a sense of endless vertigo. Interspersed among the images are fragments of text that are sometimes random and sometimes organized into sentences or poems. These reinforce the idea of art as a personal journal or diary,



Christopher Burke

Louise Bourgeois (1994–1995). From *The Insomnia Drawings*, 220 mixed-media works on paper of varying dimensions. Detail shown here: ink, charcoal and pencil on paper, 29.6 cm × 22.8 cm. Daros Collection, courtesy Cheim & Read, New York